

Riddell Fish House
245 West K Street
Benicia
Solano County
California

HABS No. CA-2082

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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Architectural and Engineering Record
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

RIDDELL FISH HOUSE
(Fish House)

HABS No. CA-2082

Location: 245 West K Street, Benicia, Solano County, California.

Present Owner/
Occupant: Mr. and Mrs. Chester L. Harvey, 245 West K Street, Benicia, California 94510

Present Use: Residence.

Significance: This house was one of the most sumptuous nineteenth-century Benicia residences. Both the shingled exterior and the rich interior spaces are virtually intact.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: ca. 1890. This is the date given by Ardella Fish Shanks, the granddaughter of the original owners, Franklin and Henrietta Riddell Rish, and is compatible with assessment records.
2. Architect: None known.
3. Original and subsequent owners: This house sits on lot 11 of block 43 in the original plat of Benicia. The following is taken from the Solano County deed records:

1857	Book K, p. 618, June 22, 1857 S. Woodbridge, Jr., to George Riddell
1888	Book 113, p. 118, May 5, 1888 E. Riddell to Henrietta Fish.
1960	Instrument Number 4445, Feb. 3, 1960 Ardella Fish Shanks to Chester L. Harvey, et ux.
4. Original plans and construction: A set of drawings of this building was given to the current owners of the property by Ardella Fish Shanks, who lived in the house until 1960. These drawings include what appear to be original plans and elevations, and tracings made from the originals to show alterations. See list in Sources of Information, below, and HABS No. CA-2082-17 through -21.

5. Alterations and additions: At an unknown date after 1890 a number of changes were made in the house. These are shown in the revised plans in the possession of the current owners. The most important changes on the exterior include the filling in of the second-floor porch balcony, the addition of a porch at the rear of the building, elimination of the window seat outside the pantry, and the opening of new windows in the front elevation of the building to light the southwest bedroom.

On the interior the first floor rear area was considerably changed with conversion of two pantries into a breakfast room and the alteration of the servants' room into a kitchen. On the second floor the bathroom was rearranged and a new bathroom added in a rather awkward manner in the back staircase. All of these changes were apparently completed by the early twentieth century.

B. Historical Context:

The land on which the house sits had been owned by the Riddell family since 1857. George Hussey Riddell was a dry-goods merchant in Boston and Nantucket before coming to California in 1849. He moved his family to Benicia in 1852, was justice of the peace from 1855 to 1873, and was county recorder from 1864 to 1866. His family apparently lived in a smaller house on the property. In 1888 the ownership of the property passed to his daughter Henrietta and her husband Franklin Fish. Henrietta Riddell Fish was an artist who taught art at St. Mary's College. Her influence is apparent in the house in details such as the repousse copper band in the hallway, which she executed.

This house and the Hastings house, located at the corner of West Second and L Streets, were probably the two grandest houses in town. The Hastings house, a great mansarded pile, was apparently constructed about 1880 and is visible in a Stumm photograph of the Riddell Fish house (HABS No. CA-2082-16). Both houses were assessed at \$4 per square foot in the 1919 assessment, much higher than the ordinary residential assessment, which averaged \$1 to \$2 per square foot.

Prepared by: Robert Brueggemann
Project Historian
Historic American Buildings Survey
Summer, 1976

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This large, elegant house exhibits Queen Anne influences.
2. Condition of fabric: Good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: This house, laid out in an irregular plan, measures approximately 38' x 53', having two stories and an attic above a raised cellar.
2. Foundation: Brick, with wood piers in center.
3. Walls: Horizontal wood siding on first floor, wood cut shingles on second floor with corner boards. There is a watertable band with vertical wood below to a sill. There are wooden panels with carved fans on the east wall of the second floor flanking a window. Similar panels are under the short window at the bay in the dining room. The bay at the stairs is corbeled from the face of the wall, as is the base of the tower at the second level.
4. Structural system, framing: Wood frame construction.
5. Porches: There is a wooden front porch with a pent roof. The roof is supported by chamfered box columns with a column on each side of the opening to the porch. A wood band forms an arch spanning from the corner columns with decorative wood panels and a wood keystone block. A simple wood banister leads up each side of the seven wooden steps from a newel and extends around the porch.

There are three wooden steps at the rear door. A brick bulkhead with wood doors is on the northeast corner of the house, leading to the cellar.

6. Chimneys: There is a red brick chimney through the roof at the edge of the tower on the west side of the house. Another red brick chimney projects through the roof about one third of the distance from the rear of the house. The exterior red brick chimney on the east side becomes narrower at the second-floor line. There are numerous recessed panels in the brick work, painted black.

7. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: The main entrance on the south side is a double opening with wood panel doors. The doors, deeply carved with fans, have a leaded stained glass panel, brass hardware and a wood threshold. There is a wood panel door on the north rear facade, with a transom window above.
- b. Windows and shutters: Most windows on the first and second floor have one-over-one-light, double-hung wooden sashes and wooden surrounds. There are two fanlights in the gables of the attic. In the attic on the east side, a one-light casement window with wood surrounds has a canopy supported by a wooden turned column and a wooden buttress on each side. On the second floor of the south side is an eight-light fixed wooden sash window flanked by two-over-one-light casement sashes each side. On the west side, the windows in the oriel at the stair landing are arched. The breakfast room window has a double-hung twelve-over-one-light wooden sash flanked by nine-over-one-light fixed sash.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The house has a hipped roof covered with asphalt shingles with intersecting gables. Decorative iron cresting extends across the ridge of the roof. There are metal downspouts and a built-in gutter.
- b. Cornice, eaves: Boxed eaves have dentils at the cornice and a cyma recta molding of the eave. The frieze is decorated with square blocks with bulls' eyes.
- c. Towers: There is a round tower with a conical roof on the southwest corner of the house. A decorative lightning rod with metal ball is mounted on the tower roof.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Cellar: There is a small cellar with dirt floor under the kitchen. Stairs from the kitchen have been blocked off.
- b. First floor: In the southwest corner are the entry and stair hall. North of that is the dining room. In the southeast corner is the parlor, and north of that the studio, now

living room. In the rear section of the house are the breakfast room and kitchen. A laundry room is in the northwest corner.

- c. Second floor: The second floor is similar to the first floor, there being five bedrooms. Two modern baths have been installed in the northeast rear corner.
 - d. Attic: The attic is unfinished except for one room on the southeast corner.
- 2. Stairways: The closed-string dog-leg stairway is an open well to the second floor. The simple wood handrail is supported by square balusters with decorative wood panels between each and a deeply carved fan in the corner of each. There is a heavy wood banding on the stringer with moldings. The rear stair is a winder, open-well and without a handrail. The stair to the attic is enclosed, very steep and no handrail.
 - 3. Flooring: Narrow board oak flooring throughout. Flooring on the second floor is covered with carpet. On the first floor the narrow boards are banded with three very narrow dark bands every other board to form a border. In the tower the dark strips radiate to form a fan. Flooring in the kitchen and baths is linoleum.
 - 4. Wall and ceiling finish: Walls and ceilings are plastered, with wallpaper on some. Plaster ceiling medallions are in the living room, parlor, dining room, master bedroom, and entry hall. There is a picture molding on the walls.

A wood panel wainscot with carved fan design is in the entry hall and dining room. A hand-tooled copper panel below the chair rail forms a frieze around the top of the wainscot in the entry hall. The breakfast room has a high wood wainscoting with battens and a plate rail on top. The ceiling has crossed, boxed beams.

- 5. Doorways and doors: Doors are wood panel with heavy wood surrounds, plinth blocks, small bull's-eye corner blocks, wood thresholds and black porcelain door knobs. Large recessed sliding wood panel doors are between the entry hall and parlor. Similar doors have been removed between the living room and parlor. Glass panel double doors are between the entry hall and living and dining rooms, and between the living and dining rooms. Door trim in the dining room is a heavy pilaster-type with capital at head.

6. Decorative features: There is a seat in the bay window at the stair landing and by the side of the fireplace under the banister in the entry hall. Window trim has small bull's-eye corner blocks. Decorative fan motifs are used throughout the house. A plaster arch is formed across the bay window in the living room, the same as in the master bedroom at the dressing alcove. A decorative wood spindle screen hangs from the ceiling at the tower alcove in the bedroom on the second floor.

Fireplace in the entry hall has tile surround and hearth with a wooden mantel and surround. There is a mirror above the mantel and spindles supporting shelves on each side of the mirror above the mantel. The fireplace in the parlor has tile surround and hearth, wood mantel with mirror above spindles supporting a shelf each side of the mirror and a rail around the top shelf above the mirror. The dining room fireplace has tile surround and hearth, cast-iron surround on heater box, wood mantel and surround, mirror above the mantel, rail at the top, a small shelf each side with spindle columns and a small inset shelf below the mantel at the apron. Fireplace in the living room has tile surround and hearth, wood mantel with mirror above and a top shelf above the mantel supported by spindles.

7. Mechanical equipment: There is a gas space heater in each fireplace and a floor furnace in the living room. Hanging lighting fixtures in some rooms are reproductions. Modern lighting is in most of the house.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The house faces south on the north side of the street. There are small residences in front and to each side. A wire fence across the front sits on wood sill panels with a wood diamond in the center of each panel. There is a gate in the center leading up to front door. On top of the fence are iron fleur-de-lis. Numerous large trees surround the site, as well as much vegetation. There is a flag pole in the front yard.
2. Outbuildings: A metal garage with gable roof and dirt floor sits on the east side of the house with a gravel drive leading to the street. There are two deteriorating wooden sheds to the northeast of the house. On the northwest is small structure with wood shingle siding and a gable roof that is in good condition. It is not accessible.

Prepared by: John P. White
Project Supervisor
Historic American Buildings Survey
July, 1976

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Architectural Drawings: The present owners of the structure have the following drawings, given to them by Ardella Fish Shanks, previous resident and granddaughter of the original owners:

- Sheet 1. Plan of the first floor (HABS No. CA-2082-17).
- Sheet 2. Plan of the second floor (HABS No. CA-2082-18).
- Sheet 3. East elevation (HABS No. CA-2082-21).
- Sheet 4. West elevation (HABS No. CA-2082-20).
- Sheet 5. South elevation. This drawing has a revised detail in the upper right corner showing the enclosure for the open balcony. The windows for the southwest bedroom are also penciled in. (HABS No. CA-2082-19).
- Sheet 6. Revised first floor plan. On this sheet are shown the gas installations and a number of alterations in the building, notably in the service block.
- Sheet 7. Revised floor plan. This plan shows gas fixtures and changes in the bathroom facilities, as well as the filled-in veranda.

B. Early Views:

Two photographs of the house from the south and from the southeast, ca. 1890. Collection Ardella Fish Shanks, Danville. These views were apparently taken the year the house was built. An old typed caption reads, "Built in 1890," on one of the photographs, and "Dolphin Tower in 1890," on the other. The latter is a reference to the dolphin on the top of the turret, perhaps intended as a symbol of the Fish family. This feature is now gone. The small house behind the current house was moved to East I Street and was called the Durner house, according to Ardella Fish Shanks. This house apparently no longer survives (HABS No. CA-2082-12 and -13).

Photograph of the house from the southeast. Collection of the current owners. This view shows the house with some of its foliage already grown, but before the enclosure of the second-floor balcony on the south elevation of the house (HABS No. CA-2082-14).

Photograph of Franklin and Henrietta Riddell Fish in the stairhall of their house. Collection Ardella Fish Shanks, Danville. This photograph shows the house furnished in the "artistic" taste of the 1890s, with a fishnet screen at the stairs and a large Art Nouveau vase on a stand (HABS No. CA-2082-15).

Stumm photograph showing the house from the south with the Hastings house visible in the distance. Stumm postcard, labeled "J9092." Collection Ardella Fish Shanks, Danville. The view probably dates to the period 1908-1916, when Stumm was active, and shows the foliage around the house already mature (HABS No. CA-2082-16).

C. Interview: Ardella Fish Shanks, Danville, CA, August 1976.

D. Bibliography:

Assessment Records of the City of Benicia, 1919. City Clerk's Office, Benicia. This book gives a sketch plan of the Riddell Fish House, information about its construction and equipment, and an estimated age of 30 years, dating the house to circa 1890.

Ridlon, C. T. History of the Ancient Ryedales and their Descendants. Manchester, New Hampshire, 1884. Copy in the possession of Ardella Fish Shanks, Danville.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey in cooperation with Exxon Company, U.S.A. (a division of Exxon Corporation) and the Benicia Historical Society. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of H.A.B.S., the project was completed during the summer of 1976 at the Historic American Buildings Survey Field Office, Benicia, California, by John P. White (Assistant Professor, Texas Tech University), Project Historian; Kenneth Payson (Cornell University), Architect; and student assistant architects Scott Barnard (University of Pennsylvania); James L. Cook (Texas Tech University); and Gary A. Statkus (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign). The written data were edited by Alison K. Hoagland in the HABS Washington office in January, 1981.